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Pascucci, Elisa

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# REFUGEES IN THE IT SECTOR: YOUNG SYRIANS' ECONOMIC SUBJECTIVITIES AND FAMILIAL LIVES IN JORDAN

ELISA PASCUCCI 

**ABSTRACT.** This article explores refugee economic subjectivity in the context of restrictive asylum policies and disrupted transnational family lives. Drawing on fieldwork with young Syrian refugees pursuing IT training in Jordan, I focus on the “coding boot camp,” an emerging educational format in the field of refugee professional training. I thus explore how Syrian youths approach humanitarian policies in which, in the absence of full social and economic rights for refugees, the question of livelihoods is addressed through the paradigms of self-reliance, creativity, and innovation. Reframing the refugee from a “protected” to a “productive” subject, and offering individual solutions to a structural economic impasse, these policies produce tensions between individual responsibilities and more-than-individual relations and identifications—with families, religious identities, and national communities—that remain unresolved. The findings contribute to geographical scholarship on economic subjectivity, familial relations, and the migrant and refugee condition, while shedding light on some of the effects of the encounter between technology-centred, neoliberal approaches to humanitarianism and restrictive migration regimes in responses to the Syrian displacement. *Keywords:* Syrian refugees, Jordan, IT sector, humanitarian technology, subjectivity, family.

Two minutes left to submit, two minutes left to submit. Please submit to: Jordan@techfugees.com.” The competition at the second “Coder-Maker Hackathon” organized in the Jordanian capital, Amman, by the local branch of the international nonprofit network Techfugees, was about to end. Rana and Fatima, who would soon be proclaimed among the winners, approached me, looking nervous and excited. For over two days, the two Syrian graduates, trained as computer programmers by the organization ReBootKamp (RBK), had worked as a close-knit team on their proposal, named “Waterwatch.” This was a smartphone application helping users across Jordan to identify, locate, and signal to local authorities leakages in the public water provision system, thus addressing one of the major environmental and infrastructural problems in the country. Together with another fourteen teams, Rana and Fatima, both in their mid-twenties, had turned Amman’s Zinc Innovation Campus, owned by the Kuwaiti mobile telecommunication company Zain, into the space where the new technological frontier of global humanitarianism materialized into an event: the hackaton. In the intensive two-day competition, young Syrian, Jordanian, and Iraqi software engineers, entrepreneurs, social workers, artists, students, and volunteers had applied their competence, creativity, and grit to some of the most pressing challenges faced by refugees in Jordan, from

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 ELISA PASCUCCI, Eurooppalaisen oikeuden, identiteetin ja historian tutkimuksen huipputyksikkö / The Centre of Excellence in Law, Identity and the European Narratives ([www.eurostorie.org](http://www.eurostorie.org)), Siltavuorenpenger 1 A, huone / room 326, PL / P.O. Box 9, 00014 Helsingin yliopisto / University of Helsinki; [[Elisa.Pascucci@helsinki.fi](mailto:Elisa.Pascucci@helsinki.fi)].

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education to livelihoods. Most of the “coders and makers” who had taken part in the hackaton were refugees themselves. The jury included Mike Butcher, editor-at-large of Techcrunch Europe, a world-leading technology website.

In Jordan in 2017, the “Californian ideology” of Silicon Valley had entered into an unlikely marriage with a humanitarian ethos reframed around the imperatives of refugee self-reliance and entrepreneurship, a marriage which Tom Scott-Smith (2015) defined as “humanitarian neophilia” (see also Barbrook and Cameron 1996). From the UNICEF’s Innovation Fund to the “Ideas Box,” the mobile library designed by Librarians without Borders in use in the community centers managed by the Danish Refugee Council, solutions to the Syrian refugee crisis were sought—or claimed to be sought—primarily through technology and the promotion of refugee entrepreneurship, with a particular focus on women and youth. The shiny high-tech veneer, however, did not erase the more concrete and long-lasting geopolitical preoccupations underpinning international donors’ efforts directed towards Syrians in Jordan. As evidenced by the Jordan Compact, the document adopted after the London conference on Syria of 2016, the support to Syrian refugees’ livelihood and the attempts at integrating them into the Jordanian economy, from agriculture to the garment industry, had among their primary aims the promotion of stability, security, and the prevention of irregular migration towards Europe (Council of Europe 2016). Since 2014, as the internationally praised open-door policy of Jordan had taken an increasingly restrictive turn, leading to the borders with Syria being shut in 2015, most Syrians had thus found themselves “stuck” in the Hashemite Kingdom, getting by through precarious work, family savings (for those who were better off), and transnational networks of social and financial support.

This article provides a critical reading of prevalent approaches to the question of refugee education and work in the context of restrictive asylum policies and disrupted transnational family lives. Focusing on the “coding boot camp,” an emerging educational format in the field of ICT training targeting refugees, it explores how young Syrians approach a humanitarian regime in which, in the absence of full legal and social rights for refugees, the question of their material and financial subsistence is addressed through the paradigms of self-reliance, creativity, technological innovation, and entrepreneurship. I argue that policies targeting refugees as individualized economic subjects are countered by the intimately entangled family and community relations that characterize the experience of refugeness, both at a local and at a transnational level (Torres and others 2016; Kallio, 2018; see also Hyndman 2001; Nagar and others 2002; Mountz and Hyndman 2006). The findings expand upon recent geographical and development scholarship that has explored the complex intersections of neoliberal governmentality and subjectivity and the migrant and refugee condition. (Popke and Torres 2013; Ilcan and Rigyel 2015; Ehrkamp 2016; Torres and others 2016; Wagner 2017; see also Bondi 2005; Sukarieh 2016). They also offer a critical snapshot of humanitarian innovation “from below,” exploring the

effects of a major policy trend on the lived experiences and family relations of young Syrians in Jordan.

The article proceeds in four main parts. The first section describes the international aid efforts and the development policies that have characterized the reception of Syrian refugees in Jordan. In particular, it discusses the rise of resilience, entrepreneurship, and technological skills training programs targeting youths in the context of global shifts towards economic self-reliance in refugee governance. The second section briefly reviews recent literature on economic subjectivity in migration and refugee studies, with particular attention to the tensions between neoliberal individualization, and family and communal life. The following two sections discuss ethnographic and interview material collected during four months of field research in Jordan, in 2017. In the conclusions, I offer some reflections on the implications of the study for both refugee and humanitarian governance and further research.

The article draws on ethnographic observation conducted during the open-day events organized by the coding boot camp organization RBK in April-May 2017, in Amman, as well as during the two days of the Techfugees Jordan Coder-Maker Hackaton, in May 2017. Ethnographic work involved both taking part in the proposed activities, such as group discussions and basic coding exercises, and hanging out and engaging in casual conversations with students and perspective students. In addition to that, I examine eleven unstructured interviews with both RBK staff and trainees, conducted in April-May 2017, and shorter follow-up interviews with former RBK trainees, conducted in September 2017.<sup>1</sup> Although I initially learned about RBK through a major international nongovernmental organization (NGO) working on refugee protection in Jordan, all of the people interviewed have been directly approached at the open events organized by the company. As a Southern-European who has lived and worked in the Middle East for several years, I shared some of the life trajectories of the young research participants—particularly experiences of graduate unemployment and struggles to fund postgraduate studies and maintain transnational family relations. While these did not erase the inequalities between my condition of European expatriate and theirs as Syrian refugees in Jordan, our shared class background and my choice to focus on the economic sphere helped to bridge the gap between our positionalities, facilitating the research encounter (see also Pascucci 2018).

#### REFUGEE ECONOMIES AND THE SYRIAN CRISIS: THE RISE OF THE TECH CAMP

The yellowish, majestic buildings and well-kept gardens of King Hussain Business Park (KHBP), where the Zain Innovation Lab is located and fieldwork for this article was conducted, occupy a large area on the western outskirts of central Amman. Built initially as a military facility, the park is at the heart of Jordan's ICT ecosystem, one of the biggest in the Middle East with over 700 companies, with a total revenue of \$682,204,679 (ICT Association in Jordan—

INTAJ 2016). The park's trajectory from a military site to a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) devoted to hi-tech industries reflects the Hashemite Kingdom's aggressively neoliberalizing development policies under King Abdullah, in which urban development has been mostly based on Public Private Partnership (PPP; Bagaeen 2006). However, it is also emblematic of a trend that has invested the wider Middle East since the early 2010s. KHBP is often described as one the most important sites of the Arab "startup spring" (Ahmari 2015). This is how fanciful developmental narratives qualified some of the economic changes that occurred across the region in the aftermaths of the 2011 uprisings, as the revolts were receding and stability was being restored, in some cases by military juntas.

Syria, however, remained a significant exception in this alleged landscape of technology, entrepreneurship, and *manu militari*-secured stability. As the country plunged further into war, by the end of 2016 the so-called Middle Eastern "startup spring" had intersected with what, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), was the biggest refugee crisis in the world, with over 5.4 million people having left Syria since 2011 (UNHCR 2017). Jordan, a country with no formal domestic asylum legislation, whose refugee policies are regulated only by a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the UNHCR, was hosting over 600,000 displaced Syrians, as well as the largest refugee camp in the Middle East, Zaatari. A rapidly urbanizing conglomerate of prefabricated temporary housing and tents in the middle of the desert, about an hour from Amman, at the time of writing Zaatari was home to around 78,500 people. Approximately another 36,600 refugees were in the Azraq camp, in the Zarqa governorate, while a few thousand more were lodged in small camps like Muriyep al Fhoud, funded by the United Arab Emirates. The vast majority of Syrians in Jordan, however, had settled autonomously in the major urban areas, including Amman.

As already remarked, securing the livelihoods of refugees in Jordan beyond the reliance on humanitarian assistance, while preventing irregular movement, soon became of paramount importance for international donors. In turn, the Jordanian government saw in the global concern about Syrian refugees a potential chance for economic development. Through the Jordan Compact, approved during the London conference on Syria of 2016, the international community promised around \$2 billion in aid and investment for Jordan. The European Union also revised its preferential rules of origin, facilitating the export of products manufactured in Jordan, especially in the garment industry (Lenner and Turner 2018). Jordan committed to issue 200,000 work permits for Syrians, and to ease international investment in five SEZs. While the actual impact of these measures remains questionable (ILO 2017; Lenner and Turner 2018), international organizations and NGOs were quick to switch their agenda from emergency relief to development, as many officers confirmed during interviews in Amman. Places like KHBP thus opened their doors to refugees and

humanitarian organizations. In a speech given at the University of California Berkeley in 2014, King Abdullah had identified in “private-sector creativity” and ICTs as “key” to the Jordanian national interest in creating “jobs—good jobs—especially for young people, the majority of our population.” Hopes were rising high about the tech sector offering opportunities for young Syrians to express their talent and, in the process, develop Jordan.<sup>2</sup>

The international community’s concern with the labor and economic lives of refugees is hardly new. Evan Easton-Calabria remarks how the question of work and livelihoods has been central in international refugee aid at least since the immediate aftermaths of the First World War (2015). The UNHCR Livelihoods Unit, established in 2008, identifies as its main tools and objectives “vocational and skills training, promoting entrepreneurship, supporting agriculture, livestock and fisheries, and strengthening access to financial services or microfinance” (UNHCR 2014, 14, as cited in Easton-Calabria 2015, 431). While today frequently labelled as “innovations,” most of these practices date back to nearly a century (Easton-Calabria 2015). Structures and implementation might have changed, but practices like “revolving funds,” more recently repackaged as “microfinance,” have been around for several decades (Easton-Calabria 2015).

The “Whole of Syria” approach to the coordination of humanitarian emergency responses to Syrian refugees,” outlined in the 2015 Strategic Response Plan (SRP), is not exempt from this iteration (Ilcan and Rygiel 2015, 337). The plan’s objective of strengthening “livelihoods and early recovery” is based on resilience-promotion, community self-reliance, and a decentred governance in which implementation is carried out through an extensive network of partners. Refugees are thus recast from “passive recipients of aid” to “having the potential to be transformed into responsible, resilient subjects who survive through crisis” (Ilcan and Rygiel 2015, 337). While actual refugee participation in policy formulation and planning remain elusive (Easton-Calabria 2015) the responsibility for surviving and recovering from crises, especially from an economic point of view, is individualized. Coupled with the technological entrepreneurship narratives promoted through, among others, the UNHCR Innovation initiative, the “humanitarian emergency governance under neoliberalism” (Ilcan and Rygiel, 2015, 343) characterizing the Syria SRP is but the latest development in a long history of governing displacement by making refugees economically viable.

#### REFUGEE ECONOMIC SUBJECTIVITY

Despite the growing policy attention to livelihoods and economies, existing critical scholarship tends to see the figure of the refugee as having no relation with global and localised class structures, modes of production, and political economies (Rajaram, 2018). As a consequence, refugee economic subjectivity—understood here as “the multiple positionalities and intentionalities that infuse

individual experience” (Rankin, 2011, 28) and that can be ascribed to the economic sphere—tends to be scarcely explored. As Gatrell’s work on “the making of the modern refugee” has highlighted, the lack of attention to the economic sphere is at risk of “stripping away attributes of social distinction and class” from refugee subjects (2013, 43, quoted in Ehrkamp 2016, 814). Across the social sciences, with the exception of recent contributions in political economy (Wagner 2017; Rajaram 2018, among others), work on refugee subjectivity focuses primarily on performativity in the context of the asylum process (such as Lacroix, 2004; Rivetti 2013; Luker, 2015). In geography, recurring themes are border securitization, and the gendered and sexualized categories through which contemporary asylum is governed (see also Szczepanikova 2010; Hyndman and Giles 2011).

Critical geographical studies on refugee subjectivity have followed a similar trajectory as those focusing on the camp and its spatialities. Literature on the camp moved from the nearly unquestioned dominance of Agambenian approaches, with their exclusive focus on reduction to bare life within spaces of exception, to more ethnographically inspired, materialistic, and postcolonial readings that have accounted for the political and cultural life that takes place within spaces of refuge (Sanyal 2012; Ramadan 2013; Sanyal 2013). In a similar vein, analyses of refugee subjectivity have moved beyond the focus on the pervasive “grammar of domination” (Rivetti, 2013, 306) that would determine the self-government of the refugee subject in institutions of asylum. This has led to the emergence of more nuanced accounts of the myriad agentic capacities and contextual negotiations involved in the experience of refugeeness, also when the latter unfolds in spaces of liminality and waiting (Dyck and McLaren, 2004; Szczepanikova 2010; Ehrkamp, 2016; Häkli and others 2017). As Ehrkamp notes, this body of work has been essential in exposing global processes that have the effect of “de-subjectifying refugees by placing them into unexamined categories” and “individualizing them by demanding particular identity performances” (2016, 818–819). Such nuanced accounts of agency, positionality, and relationality are essential for a critical assessment of prevalent approaches to refugee economies.

Contextuality and relationality feature prominently in discussions of economic subjectivity within critical migration geographies, which, unlike refugee studies, have paid significant attention to the topic. Here, the influence of feminist geographies has led to particularly interesting contributions. Drawing on Hyndman’s proposal for a feminist geopolitics (2001), Torres and others (2016, 404) theorize an approach to economic change in which mobility is used as a tool for “dissecting” and countering geopolitical and geoeconomic power. This is achieved primarily by focusing on the everyday, and bridging the gap between the global and the intimate in the study of economic processes. Following Liz Bondi’s (2005) warning about the paradoxical and politically productive effects of the neoliberal emphasis on individual agency, Popke and



Torres highlight how, for migrants, neoliberal change is “not an imposition, but a negotiation,” producing effects that are “locally variant” (2013, 225).

In this regard, family and community relations are significant. In studies of migrants’ economic subjectivity, conducts aimed at safeguarding “family interests” have often been interpreted as a product of neoliberal models of development (Popke and Torres 2013). Yet, as Popke and Torres argue, family interests “can be pursued in different ways, some of which might enhance the visions of individual agency, whereas others suggest a more collective understanding of the social” (2013, 220). As this article will show, refugees’ intimate and family relations constitute spaces where “more-than-individual forms of engagement” with economic relations can happen (Harker 2010, 2625; see also Nash 2005; Valentine 2008; Harker 2012; Kallio 2018). As such, while some of their oppressively gendered aspects are reproduced, they are also sites where models of refugee protection based on the imperatives of self-reliance, entrepreneurship, and competition are challenged. These are “filtered through existing forms of community and reciprocity,” and their hold is questioned by the experiences of precarity (as insecurity produced and distributed through social and economic relations), but also of embodied connectivity that characterize migrancy and refugeeness (Popke and Torres 2013, 226; see also Harker, 2010, 2012).

Considering economic life as strictly intertwined with the multifaceted agencies and positionalities that characterize the refugee condition, in what follows I approach the question of economic subjectivity by putting young Syrians’ experiences of professional training and work in the tech sector in the constrained context of their refugee family life. Here, economies are not seen as simply “a mode of exchange”, but as “mediated by social values and hierarchies” (Rajaram 2018, p. 1). Their spatialized dimensions involve first and foremost the space of the “tech camp”, but also family as a social and geographical space that is lived both intimately and transnationally, as well as the multiple scales of the globalized securitization of borders and asylum policies.

#### THE PROMISE OF THE CODING BOOT CAMP

This new form of education training called “coding boot camp” could take somebody from zero to hero in twelve weeks! You take a bus driver who’s making \$40,000 a year to software engineer in twelve weeks, and he’s making \$120,000... (RBK manager and cofounder, Amman, 2017)

The enthusiastic words of one of the founders of the Jordanian-American organization RBK reflect those of U.S. President Barack Obama who, in 2016, defined the “coding boot camp,” an intensive, immersive educational format for training in computer programming, usually offered by private companies, as “a ticket to the middle class” (Wilson, 2017, 67). That year, companies like the Flatiron School in New York and San Francisco-based Hack Reactor, with



their ambition of competing with formal college education in computer science, had started to attract media attention in the United States (Wilson, 2017, 67). Their luring promise was not only about professional training, but also success and social mobility.

Founded in Jordan in December 2014, RBK—the only coding boot camp in the Arab world according to its website—offers a sixteen-week program in computer programming that is modelled on the Hack Reactor curriculum. While the program is open to both Jordanians and foreigners living in Jordan, many of its students are refugees. Besides private donors, the organization developed in collaboration with the UNHCR and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and has enjoyed a successful partnership with the latter that has allowed many young Syrians, Iraqis, and Yemenis to receive scholarships and loans covering the 5,700 JD (US\$8,040) fee. At the time when fieldwork for this paper was conducted, none of the Syrian refugees I met who were enrolled for the training was paying fees—they all benefited from bursaries. The Danish Refugee Council also features among the RBK partners. This highlights the convergence of national economic and humanitarian rationalities that frame the work of education start-ups, NGOs, and social enterprises in Jordan. The Hashemite Kingdom sees international donors' support for refugee livelihoods as an opportunity for national development, and is adamant in pursuing its "Jordanians first" approach: internationally funded aid and development programs must benefit Jordanians too, and the employment of noncitizens remains strictly regulated. As this article will show, the implications of this approach for young Syrians' education and professional perspectives are significant.

Applicants to the RBK training are typically admitted after attending a series of introductory events and a standard questionnaire-based interview. The main entry requirements are motivational: commitment to the training and willingness to work in the Jordanian IT sector upon completion. Personality and attitudes are also regarded as very important. While most of the Syrian, but also Jordanian, Iraqi, and Yemeni students I met while conducting fieldwork for this paper had completed at least secondary school, and many had a university degrees, formal education is not regarded as essential. The full-stack, Javascript-based curriculum offered is rather broad, and includes introductory data structures and algorithm training, making it accessible to candidates with different backgrounds. English-language entry requirements are also relatively low, even though reaching fluency in English is considered an essential objective of the program.

RBK has in common with its U.S. equivalents the ambition to act as a "disruptor" to the local formal education system (Skonnard 2015). In the interviews I had with the RBK management and trainers, secondary schools and universities in Jordan were depicted as excessively hierarchical and based on pedagogies that do not foster free, critical thinking and individual creativity. Although

such critiques are not entirely debased, and the views expressed by the RBK staff were generally nuanced, such perceptions of formal, public education resonated with the generalizing negative assessment of local and Syrian graduates by humanitarian and development professionals in Jordan. These were depicted as having few, if any, marketable skills, and being burdened by a sense of entitlement that led them to expect to find a guaranteed, stable job without much effort, possibly in state bureaucracies—a sweeping judgement that often sounded like a start-up era version of Syed Hussein Alatas's (1977) famous "myth of the lazy native" (see also Rajaram, 2018).

The solution to this alleged impasse offered by the RBK coding boot camp is individual, and consists of making young refugees (and unemployed Jordanians) desirable employees in an aspirational emerging new economy. This transformation is achieved by combining a culturally specific version of the Silicon Valley work culture with humanitarian practices and values. As already remarked, in the boot camp the main emphasis is on motivation and soft skills. According to the organization's own website, the latter include "communication, collaboration, ethics, professionalism, autonomous (self) learning skills, problem solving skills and critical thinking skills." Moreover, as far as the technical training is concerned, the camp open-source pedagogy utilizes "agile principles: sprint learning, peer-based learning, problem-based learning, fail-based learning, heavily-facilitated learning, psycho-social support" (interview with RBK manager, Amman, 2017).

Interpersonal skills and psychological traits are thus essential to, and strictly entwined with, the experience of "learning to code." Empathy and "emotional intelligence" are regarded as essential skills for employability in the IT job market. Alongside more conventional forms of work on the self, such as regular individual and group counselling with a trained psychologist, the boot camp thus provides several spaces and opportunities for less-structured interaction.

RBK's trainees daily schedule involves an early start with a shared breakfast, provided by the organization, followed by coding challenges aimed at developing group-oriented problem-solving skills. Then comes practice to be carried out in pairs, which is considered important to develop accountability and responsibility to partners. The generous lunch break is then followed by an hour of "screen-free time," which the students are strongly encouraged to devote to physical exercise. In the evening, after a light dinner consumed all together, there are usually other planned activities, ranging from simple social outings and gatherings to meetings with perspective employers. In general, mimicking Silicon Valley's long-hours work culture, students are encouraged—or at least not discouraged—to stay and continue "hacking" well into the night. In this regard, RBK is an example of how, also in the lives of those who are marginally included in global capitalism (Rajaram, 2018), such as young refugees in a peripheral country, "neoliberalism 'unmakes' boundaries such as

between work and ‘time-out,’ entrepreneurship and self-care” (Fixsen and others 2017, 13, see also Knudsen and Swedberg 2009 and Patel 2010).

Great value is also attributed to the students’ ability to live and work in a diverse environment showing liberal, tolerant, and nonpatriarchal attitudes. Engaging in excessive and disrespectful “man-splaining,” one of the managers and trainers said, could easily be a reason not to be allowed to complete the program. Stories such as those of conservative Muslim male students “who had never talked to a woman who wasn’t a family member” before enrolling for the training, and had then to quickly learn to work in close collaboration with female colleagues of different backgrounds, were recounted with pride. “If you discriminate on the basis of religion, ethnicity, tribal name, gender identity... you’re in trouble here,” was the comment of one of the organization’s founders. The training thus explicitly demanded a deep and all-encompassing transformation, one very much centered around the notion of self-growth.

In Foucault’s reading of Marx, “technologies of production” and “technologies of the self” work in “constant interaction” and “every technique of production requires modification of individual conduct—not only skills but also attitudes” (1988, 18). As a professional training space, the tech camp works precisely by promoting this close interaction of technologies of productive discipline and self-improvement. Historically, the boot camp is a format associated with youth, military, and correctional regimes (Wilson, 2017). The educational and therapeutic dimensions of work and training are thus inextricably linked to the experience of spatial and temporal immersion. The camp is a self-contained space where trainees study, work, play, eat together, and, in some cases, sleep in the same rooms, “leaving everything behind,” as one of the RBK trainers explained, for sixteen weeks. At the RBK open events in spring 2017, it was not uncommon to hear former students of the programme describe the boot camp as “life-changing.” Several graduates expressed particular appreciation for the professional counselling offered by the organization. This framing of the camp as a juvenile “rite of passage,” a turning point in one’s personal growth and quest for individual autonomy highlights some of the political tensions in employment policies specifically targeting young refugees. As Sukarieh and Tannock note, at a global level, policy interest in youth is “directly linked to the global rise and spread of neoliberal forms of capitalism” (2016, 1286). As a policy category, they write, youth has “individualist, universalist and functionalist ties with notions of personal development and growth” that have made it an attractive alternative to “other, more collectivist, conflictual and politicized social identities and categories of class, race, nation and religion” (Sukarieh and Tannock 2016, 1286).

As the next section will show, however, for the young people involved, renouncing—or sidelining—collective identifications and sources of informal protection such as extended family and religion, when at all possible, did not necessarily amount to a form of emancipation and positive autonomy. Rather,

it meant being left alone to face an increasingly securitized global refugee regime, and a scant and ruthless labor market.

#### ECONOMIC FAMILY SPACES

Yes, I did complete the training. . . Well, here we are. There are no jobs, so we continue to study. . .—RBK graduate, female, from Syria, Amman, 2017

We are all here because there are no jobs, right? I think we all agree on that. There are no jobs. —participant in the Techfugees Coder-Maker Hackaton, male, from Syria, Amman 2017

At the RBK “Meet & Greet” event, an open day held in Amman’s KHBP in April 2017 to allow perspective students to meet staff and alumni of the coding boot camp, unemployment was an experience shared by all the participants. None of the young Syrians met—nearly all having a university degree, mostly from an urban middle-class background—had joined to improve their “career perspectives”: rather, they were there “to find a job,” as they put it. The difference in language denotes an important difference in attitudes and expectations. Most of them felt they had no chances of actual professional success, no matter what kind of degrees they held. The best they could hope for, if they were lucky, was finding decent work to support themselves and their families.

Such feelings were not without reason. As already mentioned, having no international legal obligations to refugees’ social and economic rights, Jordan has very restrictive rules as to their access to the job market. Although these were partially mitigated by the Jordan Compact’s commitment to issue work permits to Syrians, in 2017 access to qualified sectors of the job markets remained almost exclusively reserved to Jordanian citizens (see Lenner and Turner 2018). Among other things, this meant that non-Jordanian RBK graduates, including all the young Syrians I met while conducting research for this paper, could only find employment through consultancy schemes, and not through regular work contracts. Coupled with Jordan’s structurally high unemployment rates, RBK perspective students’ grim outlook on the future appeared thus rather realistic.

Two months after completing the training, RBK alumna Mariam—“one of the technically most gifted coders we have ever trained,” as one of the members of staff described her—had had job interviews at two different IT companies, but she was still waiting to hear back from them. At 27, she was looking for a job that would allow her to economically support her family of origin. Like Mariam, RBK students who were praised for their technical talent seemed to embrace the values of self-development and entrepreneurship proposed to them through the training. However, even in such cases professional and economic success was not conceived as a merely individual endeavour. Commitments and responsibilities towards parents, siblings, spouses, future children, friends,

and neighbours were often the main reasons to train as a coder and improve one's chances to find a good job. While the training proposed empathy, active listening, and collaboration as tools for personal growth and success, most of the young people I spoke to considered individual success as a way to build materially grounded and intimately connected relations of familiarity and communal care.

Aya, the youngest daughter of a devout Muslim family, also an RBK alumna in search of a job, described her responsibilities towards the family as follows:

The first job interview I had after the training was a complete mess. Yes, sure, at RBK we get to do mock job interviews, but still... I am going to try again, sure. My family has already supported me throughout my undergraduate degree, they have done so much for me. I cannot ask them to do it again for a master. I would like to do a master in engineering, but first I would like to work for a bit, help my parents, save some money and then pay for it myself.<sup>3</sup> (...) I cannot go abroad to study, because the government won't let me come back to Jordan again to see my family. And I cannot travel alone, especially not abroad. That would not be acceptable for my family. I am not allowed to spend the night outside, for instance here in Amman at RBK. So... well, that's how it is. I am just going to look for a job and do my master here, in Jordan.

The modality through which Aya provided support to her parents—staying at home and compromising, rather than moving out to look for better job opportunities—were highly gendered. Nevertheless, essentialising her choices as a mere sign of patriarchal family structures curtailing the individual freedom and career prospects of a young woman would not do justice to the complex web of relations of care and shared responsibility that constituted her social self. Such a move should be avoided not only because, in the context of family in the Middle East, it is clearly ridden with Orientalistic and culturally deterministic fallacies (Harker, 2010), but also because it obscures the complex economic relations and subjectivities that characterize the refugee condition. As highlighted by the discussion of her plans for postgraduate studies after the RBK training, Aya was moved by feelings of gratitude and reciprocity that led her to carefully negotiate, rather than simply suppress, her individual aspirations.

Sukarieh considers class to be the central factor leading poor young Jordanians to privilege community and family relations over personal affirmation, resisting the individualizing ethos of entrepreneurship underpinning development programs (2016). The case of RBK trainees and perspective students, shows how migrancy and refugeeeness also produce specific configurations of precarity that embed economic aspirations, negotiations, and practices into the intimate and the familial. As Harker has shown, in context of military occupation, conflict, and displacement, practices of “getting by” spanning education,

urbanization and mobility “are not simply enabled by family, but are themselves family practices and spacings” (2010, 2635).

The refugee students approached the technologies of individualization and self-discipline upon which the RBK training was based with flexible scepticism. During my last visit to Amman, in September 2017, I asked some of the trainees I had met months earlier to update me about their employment situation. Some of those who were by then at work explained how they had refused some of the offers they had previously received, or only worked for few weeks with certain companies, and then left. The reasons were mostly related to them not liking the way coworkers and managers treated them, or refusing to work an excessive amount of extra hours. Similar decisions are in contrast with the tech camp’s ethics of extreme flexibility and low boundaries between personal and professional life. For some of the trainees, embracing cosmopolitan and liberal lifestyles and values in order to find a job was also controversial. While trying their best to “adapt,” some expressed their desire to stick to the conservative values that they shared with their families and communities.

Syrian youths thus carefully deployed their strategic agency to navigate the variegated training and study opportunities offered by education start-ups, UN, international NGOs, and Jordanian charities close to the Hashemite government. Hanan was a refugee in her thirties with a civil engineering degree from a public university. By the time we met at the RBK event, her degree was already over five years old, and it had never been put to use, first because of war, then because of internal displacement. After her father’s death, Hanan’s family had finally relocated to Jordan, hoping to find some stability and perhaps a chance for resettlement to a third country through the UNHCR program, for which they had applied. Meanwhile, Hanan was trying other ways, both to improve her employment perspectives in Jordan, and to get a visa to travel abroad. Rather than engaging in a mere “timepass” in the absence of more meaningful ways to spend her time in Jordan (Wagner, 2017), Hanan, like most of the refugee youths at RBK, was looking for another piece in the puzzle of her family’s precarious middle-class livelihood.

As Hanan’s experience shows, mobility is often the most challenging aspect of this puzzle. Like her, several other RBK graduates and students had applied for resettlement through the UNHCR, together with their families. 25-year old Hoda, a degree in computer sciences and three years of unemployment in Jordan before joining RBK, explained how legal and administrative obstacles meant that, ultimately, leaving Jordan seemed like the only viable option to achieve some stability:

We cannot have a driving licence here. . . Syrians cannot have a driving licence in this country. It’s understandable, the streets are already crowded, there are already many cars. . . and many Syrians, imagine if they all wanted to drive their car! (Laughs.) Still. There are restrictions, problems everywhere. There is that restriction, and work permits restrictions, and there are no safe ways, no

opportunities to travel or leave Jordan... Eventually the easiest way to travel for Syrians is... how it is called? Relocation? I mean, through the UN.

Ali, from Damascus, also had a university degree in computer science. When we met, he had been in Jordan for four years. He had arrived together with his family, but after a while his father had decided to go back to the Syrian capital. A few months later, Ali's mother was thinking about leaving Syria again. As he admitted, Ali had no idea where he would end up settling, nor how the Syrian war would end:

There are all those rumours about partition (of the country)... I don't really believe them. But we have seen all sorts of things. I have no idea where all those weapons even came from, where things like imposing *hijab* (Islamic headscarf) on Christian women did come from. (...) If I don't find a job here, I will be going to... (Smiles). What other options do I have, apart from the sea? I thought about crossing the sea from Turkey many times. I have many friends who did it. They are now in Germany. Some of them went through Libya, via Egypt.

The central and eastern Mediterranean routes featured often in the familial histories of the young Syrian software engineers. In 2014, Magid and his family had arrived in Egypt from Lebanon, where they had at first sought safety from the violence in Syria. In Cairo, Magid had worked for a shopping assistant for about eight months. Disappointed and increasingly frustrated with the little future perspectives that life in Egypt seemed to offer, and being lucky enough to be able to count on some financial support from his family, Magid has followed his aspirations and moved to Amman to enrol first for a scientific degree at the University of Jordan, and then for the RBK training. A few months after his arrival to Jordan, his two brothers who had remained in Egypt had decided to seek refuge in Europe, travelling to Italy via sea.

They just took a boat to Europe. It took them twelve days to reach their destination. Twelve days in which I felt... it was the longest days in my life. No sleep, no eating until I heard back from them again. Yes, smugglers would tell people that it takes much shorter, but it takes at least ten days to cross the Mediterranean there. At least. [...] My parents? No, my parents didn't travel that way. You can't send older people, your parents, on a dangerous field trip like that. It is not appropriate for them.

Magid's vivid account of the feelings experienced during his brothers' journey highlight the constrained, precarious, but also binding relations that constitute refugee family spaces. While Magid's decision to move to Jordan was also determined by his own individual aspirations, both his and his brothers' trajectories of mobility were part of a transnational configuration of care and intersubjective responsibility. Once Magid's brothers had made it to their final destination, Germany, and received asylum there, they had rapidly applied for family reunification, getting their parents to travel to Europe safely. Like many



of the young people enrolling for the training offered by RBK, they were thus hoping to find “good work” that would allow them to support members of their extended family and communities in Syria and in neighbouring countries. Their economic selves were deeply embedded in relations aimed at countering the precarity produced by displacement and migration and refugee governance.

### CONCLUSIONS

Some of the young refugees I met while conducting research for this article benefited from the RBK training and, albeit through the precarious expedient of temporary consultancy contracts, managed to find paid work in the Jordanian tech start-up sector. For some, like Fatima and Rana, the winners of the Techfugees competition mentioned in the introduction to this article, the benefit was particularly significant. In a context of widespread socio-legal precarity and growing economic inequality, initiatives like RBK, which foster agency and autonomy rather than reinforcing narratives of victimhood, should not be easily dismissed (see Ehrkamp, 2016).

Yet this article has also shown the gap between the tech camp’s narratives of success and the lived experience of young refugees in Jordan. Actual, “decent” work remains scarce, legal access to it extremely limited, and young middle-class Syrians in Jordan are thoroughly aware of it. As Linda Herrera has eloquently put it, before growing evidence of the limits of start-up and entrepreneurship models, when not accompanied by initiatives aimed at more structural change, “it is unfair and disingenuous to propagate the myth that anyone with an idea, grit and determination” can be economically successful (2017, 42). To promise success in the IT sector to young women and men who are stuck in a country that does not even allow them to get a driving licence, with very few options for international travel besides deadly dangerous, irregular migration via sea, seems incongruous at the very least.

That these youths would rather stick with their families as sources of economic, social, and moral support should thus come as no surprise. Nevertheless, while showing how refugee family life can act as a disruptor to neoliberal developmental discourses and practices, it is important to avoid “reaffirming or naturalizing particularly powerful (and thus pervasive) discursive norms around intimate relations” as articulated through the nuclear, heteronormative family (Harker 2010, 2637). For the trainees interviewed for this article, “more than individual” subjectivities in family contexts were not necessarily synonymous of happy and shared—let alone emancipatory—life choices. To the contrary, their decisions often involved laborious negotiations of gendered expectations and parental impositions. Suffice it to think about how “taking care of the family” resulted in completely different decisions for Aya and Magid; while the former, as a woman, felt she would be better able to help her loved ones by living at her parents’ place, for the latter honouring his family responsibilities meant going abroad to study and work.

The point here is not to idealise refugee families as sites of resistance to neoliberal development. Rather, it is to show the inadequacies and contradictions of a model of economic integration targeting young refugees with promises of individual success, while actually offering little or no security, in a global context of shrinking budgets for international aid and increasingly restrictive migration policies. Encouraging young middle-class Syrians to embrace competition in the local labor market, the tech camp—despite its narratives of full employment and flexible, cool middle-class ascendance—risks creating winners and losers, producing further inequalities where family ties and communal belonging have already been stretched or torn apart (see Dolan and Rajak 2016).

This article has shown how little young Syrian software engineers actually engaged with the subject position of the brilliant, successful coder—the start-up economy winner. Instead, it was the needs of more vulnerable members of their families and communities—aging parents, unemployed siblings, and the like—that shaped the decisions they made in their economic lives. Livelihood policies that fail to take into account how the economic agency of refugees in precarious socio-legal conditions is embedded in familial relations of care, reciprocity, and responsibility are deemed to have limited effects. As the interviews in this article demonstrate, such relations are moral, affective, and transnational, but also binding in their material implications. The professional and economic choices that made sense for my Syrian interlocutors, be they women or men, were those that were functional within their family and community relational space, and not simply those that maximised their individual success in the IT sector.

Finally, while this article has focused on a specific ethnographic case, some of the questions addressed point to phenomena that are global in scale, and increasingly relevant for refugee geographies. These include solutions to complex socio-political crises sought through technological innovation and the involvement of corporate actors and corporate governance tools in humanitarian delivery. The uneven results of these processes call for further engagements with the question of refugee economic subjectivity, engagements which should be simultaneously attuned to the embodied and intimate dimensions of the economic everyday and to the transnationality of global processes.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> While Rana and Fatima, the winners of the Techfugees Jordan 2017 competition mentioned in this introduction, are referred to by their real names, in the case of all other participants, out of respect for the intimacy of their personal and family lives, names have been changed and other identifiers omitted.

<sup>2</sup> <http://jordanembassyus.org/news/remarks-his-majesty-king-abdullah-ii-innovative-jordan-conference-university-california> (accessed October 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Public higher education is not free in Jordan, and tuition fees for technical and scientific degrees can be rather high.

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